

Trapping on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Chris Johnson

For those looking for an excuse to get out this winter and explore the Refuge and its wildlife, trapping season opened November 10 for many of the Peninsula's furbearers. To trap on the Kenai Refuge you must have attended our trapper orientation class. The class covers State and Refuge regulations, principles of furbearer management, trapping tips, and trapping ethics. It is only required for your first year of trapping on the Refuge, although old grads are always welcome to attend. Every trapper over age of 16 must have a valid State of Alaska Trapping License and must secure a Trapping Permit from the Refuge each year.

In addition to the State regulations, the Refuge has its own special regulations, which are designed to maintain healthy furbearer populations and to reduce the harvest of non-target species (such as birds of prey). These regulations also seek to reduce conflicts between trappers and other winter outdoor users of the Refuge, and to promote humane trapping methods.

Let me explain some of these regulations and the philosophy behind them. The first thing to say is that the basic rules and bag limits for trapping, as for hunting and fishing, are set by the State of Alaska. These rules and bag limits apply to all public (Federal/State/Borough/City, etc) land and to all private property in Alaska. You can't shoot two moose in one season just because they are in your backyard. On the Refuge we add further rules in keeping with our mission as a National Wildlife Refuge. For example, for trapping on the Refuge we require that all traps and snares be identified with a name tag or an ID mark registered with the Refuge, whereas the State of Alaska has no such rule. We have many trappers using the Refuge, and we feel that identification encourages trappers to take responsibility for the hardware they are putting out in the field. Identification also helps recover lost traps.

Similarly, we require that all leghold traps be checked at least every four days in northern and west-central parts of the Refuge (Game Management units 15A and 15B-West) and at least every seven days throughout the rest of the Refuge. Conibear and drowning sets must be checked at least once every

seven days throughout the Refuge. These trap-check requirements are directed at promoting humane trapping and the timely release of non-target animals. Experienced trappers know that checking traps regularly increases the efficiency of the trapline, and can avoid bad publicity about trapping.

Traps and snares are prohibited within thirty feet of "sight-exposed" baits. Sight-exposed bait includes animal parts (such as dead fish) placed to visually attract an animal to a trap. This regulation is aimed at reducing the take of non-target animals, especially birds of prey like eagles and hawks which hunt by sight. The thirty foot rule is also good trapping practice because any furbearer you catch won't be so near the bait that it frightens off other furbearers.

We ask that trappers (and hunters) report all tags and radiocollars taken from furbearers within three days to Refuge headquarters at 262-7021. Our biologists studying these animals don't need to waste your tax money trying to locate an animal that is in your garage or shed.

Trapping is prohibited within one mile of public roads, two miles of campgrounds and trailheads, and within the Skilak Wildlife Recreation Area. This regulation is designed to reduce user conflicts (such as pets in traps) and to provide opportunities for viewing wildlife near roads and campgrounds, especially for sedentary species such as beaver.

Steel leghold traps having teeth, spiked, or serrated jaws are prohibited. This will reduce the likelihood of injury to a non-target animal which is going to be released.

When lynx season is closed, "cubby" and flag sets are not allowed. A cubby set is a structure (natural or man-made) which guides the animal into an area where bait is placed and a flag or wing is used to attract the animal into the trap. Lynx are very curious and this type of set (especially with a castor-type lure) can be very effective for them.

For beaver, only one set per lodge per season is allowed in the lake-and-muskeg area of the Refuge (i.e., Game Management Unit 15A, north of the Sterling Highway). Each lodge that is being trapped during the current season must be visually marked with

a pole vertically set in the ice, so that other trappers will not place sets on the lodge. This regulations is designed to avoid completely trapping all the beavers in a lodge and leaving no breeding stock for the next season.

Trappers are required to submit an accurate furbearer harvest report to the Refuge after the end of the trapping season. The information is very useful to the biologists and managers, because determining population levels of most furbearer species is extremely difficult. Harvest records reflect the annual trapping effort and provide a useful index of the health of furbearer populations as well as showing trends over time in these populations. This is one of the best ways that trappers can actively participate in management of furbearers.

This winter the Refuge will be purchasing skinned carcasses of wolverines and collared lynx and wolves. We want only the intact carcasses. Our biologists use the carcasses to study the overall health of the population. A check for scars on the uterus, for example,

will show how many offspring were born this year. The carcasses must be from the Refuge. The rates are \$50.00 for female wolverines, collared lynx and collared wolves.

On Saturday, November 20, the Refuge will be holding the annual Trapper Orientation class from 9:30am to 12:00 at Refuge Headquarters on Ski Hill Road. As noted above, this is a mandatory class for trapping on the Refuge for those that have not attended the class in the past. After the class, starting at 1:00pm, we will have a snaring seminar and field demonstrations on trapping. The snaring seminar is not mandatory for trapping on the Refuge, but as a bonus those attending the seminar will be granted a seven day snare check on the Refuge portions of Game Management Unit 15A and 15B-West.

Chris Johnson has been a law enforcement officer on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1989. He and his wife Pam live in Sterling with their three children. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.